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Dogs

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Dogs

I was sent home early from school for not letting Billy Pushkin drink water after I made him eat one stick of white chalk and one stick of yellow. The principal called my house and my mom's boyfriend said yeah, sure, send him home. I didn't want to go home though because Albert would be lying on the couch wearing baggy shorts and no underwear, drinking apple wine. I thought about going to The Liquor for a Big Hunk, but I'd spent all my money looking at Emily Klein's bare butt before school. So I went instead to see Blair Bodine, who was home sick. I'd tell Blair I started a club, charge him a quarter to join, then take his money to The Liquor and get my Big Hunk. Maybe check out Emily's tits with the change.

Blair answered the door in pajama bottoms and no top. He said his mom wasn't home so I couldn't come in. In his driveway, a red wagon sat with an empty wire cage on top of it. I asked Blair what the cage was for, but he wouldn't say. Then I told him I had an extra full nelson, did he want it? He said that he did.

Blair should have watched more wrestling. I pinned his arms behind him and dropped him to the mat that read *Please Wipe Your Feet* and he admitted he'd been playing dogs with the kid next door. It was a dog cage.

That sounds like fun, I said. Let's play. Blair

said he didn't want to. I'll be a Doberman Pinscher, I said. You're a Poodle. Get in the cage.

Blair got in. I took the padlock that hung loose from the latch and clicked it shut. I'm not a Poodle, though, Blair said. I'm a Collie.

Okay, I said. You're a Collie. Bark.

Blair barked. His nose was running and his back glistened with sweat.

You must be hot, I said. I wheeled Blair in his cage across the lawn to the faucet and squirted him with the hose. He whimpered for a minute, then I turned the nozzle and the spray changed from a chunky mist to a stiff rope.

I'm sick, he screamed. Then, for no reason, he barked again. That was pretty funny, so I stopped squirting him. But then, seeing me laugh, *he* laughed too, and I didn't like that. I turned the nozzle again and drilled him. Forever.

Shut up, I said when he started screaming. Dogs like water. Especially Collies.

But Blair wouldn't shut up. Cry, cry, cry. So I wheeled the wagon out to the sidewalk and charged kids getting out of school a dime each to squirt him. The hose was plenty long, and soon I had nearly a buck, a week's worth of Big Hunks. I turned the hose over to the kids with no money and let them squirt Blair for free. I wasn't a mean kid, not like they said I was.

I was about to turn Blair loose—enough was enough—when a car drove by, then stopped and backed up until it was in front of us. Four high-schoolers got out and one of them took the hose from me. What do you think you're doing, he said. I told him I was letting people squirt my friend for money. He took the hose from me and fiddled with the nozzle. I shrunk back, thinking he was going to squirt me, but then he went

ahead and turned the stream on Blair. I didn't say anything about the dime. When he finished, he crimped the hose and offered it to another guy, a bigger one. The second one, though, said no, he had a better idea. He unzipped his fly.

Blair screamed like a sissy until the pee hit him, then he shut up. He crouched down and pressed both hands over his mouth. The sound the pee made on his back was a sad one, like he was hollow, not a real kid or even a dog, just a bag of garbage left out in the rain.

Hey, I said. Don't do that. He's sick.

When he finished peeing, the big kid zipped up and they all got into the car. I picked up the hose, but the one who'd peed leaned out the window and said, If you wash him off, we're coming back for you. I dropped the hose and the nozzle clicked on the cement. Blair opened his eyes when he heard it, but then he said, It burns, it burns, and pressed his hands to his face.

I looked at the kid who'd peed and said, You owe me fifteen cents, you son of a bitch. I tacked on a nickel for using pee instead of water. The kid didn't pay though, and they drove off laughing.

Blair was crying so hard he couldn't tell me where the key to the lock was. Then a car that looked like his mom's station wagon turned the corner, and I ran. A long way down the street, the car passed me—it was no one I knew. But I was almost to our apartment by then, so I kept going. I was starting to feel sick, too.

When I got home, Albert gave me a note for The Liquor and a stolen traveler's check from the wrinkled paper sack he had that was full of them. I walked to The Liquor and gave the guy the note and the check and he gave me three bottles of Albert's wine. Half way home I remembered about the Big Hunk. I went back

to The Liquor and bought one, careful to use my own money, not Albert's, though I could have, easy.

My mom was home from her day job and getting ready for her night job when I got back. She said Blair's mom had run screaming toward her car as she drove by his house. She said she'd slammed on the brakes to keep from hitting her. What was wrong with me, my mom wanted to know. Why was I such a terrorist? Wasn't it enough for me to ruin her life? She smacked me on the neck with the cord from her curling iron. How long was I going to be a little bastard, she asked. Why hadn't she kept her goddamn pants on? She wept as she hit me. What was wrong with me, she asked again. With her? Why were we all like this?

I wriggled loose from her, and she threw a tan bottle of make-up that hit me in the lip. Albert grabbed the sack of wine when my blood started dripping into it. First thing he did was fish out my Big Hunk, peel away the black and white wrapper, and take a bite. That's mine, I said.

Albert looked at it real close, said he didn't see my name anywhere. He took another big bite, then ran his tongue down the length of it and threw it to me. I sat on the floor in the corner by the TV and ate it without wiping it off. I stared at Albert and he stared at me. When I put the candy to my lips, the white nougat turned pink. It tastes better like this anyway, I said.

My mother retrieved her bottle of make-up and wiped it clean. She uncapped it and dabbed the liquid cover-up onto both cheeks, watching me as I ate. I saw from the way she looked at me that she was wondering what kind of person I was going to be. Strangely enough, I was thinking about this too. But unlike my mother, who four years later would leave me at Jerry's coffee shop in Hollister, California, hand me twenty

dollars and drive away, I never finished the thought. The image of Blair, pee-soaked and caged, sobbing, reared up before me and pushed everything else away. I saw Blair, and I saw the stream of pee pattering on his back, and I saw that it was mine.

I don't know, maybe the high school kids were real, maybe just a lie I told and told and came to believe. Twenty years later I can't say which. What I do remember, though, is the bitterness of that candy bar, the image of my friend, and the question that I asked myself as my mother stood there rubbing the brown batter into her face, hating me and becoming beautiful: *Why didn't you go back and let him out of that cage, you fool? He would have given anything.*